

“A VISION FOR FIRST PRESBYTERIAN:

JESUS IS COMING. LOOK BUSY.”

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Text: Luke 14: 25-33

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I said last Sunday that I wanted to use the September sermons to lift up a vision for future ministry at First Presb. We started with the basic point that God is the bottom line of our lives. A vision is supposed to excite people and get an organization moving. So why then is our second foundational text based on one of the most difficult passages in the entire New Testament? “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple?” That hardly sounds like a comment to get people anything but upset, doesn’t it?

Obviously, some scriptural digging is required if the passage is going to have meaning for us. Clearly Jesus was annoyed by the casual attitude of the crowds that were flocking around him. They were more like religious groupies than true disciples. They hung around for what they could get and not for what they could give. This man heals people and tells wonderful stories so let’s gather around him. In that sense, the attitude of the crowd wasn’t so different from that of many today who look to religion only as a means of benefiting themselves.

A few other considerations: Jesus in his teaching often used exaggeration to emphasize his message and perhaps was doing so in this case. Also the word “hate” in the first century had a different connotation than it does today. It was almost a slang expression that meant to “to deliberately put aside one thing to choose another.” Thus what Jesus wanted to do in using such strong language was to get people then and now to think about priorities in life.

And is not setting priorities one of the crucial issues in our busy lives? Last week we said that God’s unconditional “amazing grace” stands at the heart of our vision and our theology. We tend to forget, however, that we cannot simply wrap ourselves up in divine love. Rather it is a gift that has to be shared. There is an old story that I occasionally use at weddings. A young man wrote his fiancée and proclaimed his love. “Nothing will keep me from being with you. I’ll swim the longest ocean, climb the highest mountain” and on and on he went. At the end he added, “P.S. I’ll be over Sat. nite I it doesn’t rain.” It was that kind of attitude that must have upset Jesus. It is this kind of casual commitment that keeps Christ’s Church from being all that it could be in this new century.

Jesus’ hope was that listeners would reassess the priorities of their lives and look again at what was most important. He wanted to encourage them to take at least a few faith steps. He recognized that commitment begins with counting the cost of following him. Hence, he added two stories, one about building and the other about going to war, both of which suggested you have to know what you are getting into before starting out. And you have to ask yourself if you are ready to do what is necessary to achieve your goal. In other areas of life, we do this all the time. Whoever goes down to the car dealer and buys a new car without doing some financial figuring before hand?

The problem is that some, and let's be honest about this, count the cost of discipleship and decide they aren't willing to ante up. It's a little bit like the men we read about in our society who are happy to live with someone but are not willing to make a permanent commitment through marriage. Such an attitude eventually destroys the relationship because the individual has divided loyalties and won't place his partner first. Many Christians have a similar problem today. I can recall leaving the house of a family that was quite active in a church but also heavily involved in soccer. I thought to myself as I walked down the steps, "God, I hope that they never have to choose between the two." Christ is telling us that we need to be clear what is at the center of our lives as this week begins. Will faith shape our thoughts and actions this week or will it be a very small and segregated segment of our behavior process?

It's important to remember that the shape of this spiritual commitment will be different for different people at different times. Peter left everything and followed; Zacchaeus came down from the tree and gave away a significant portion of his wealth; Lydia supported the church through her business. In the early church, this passage would have brought to mind the martyrdom of many followers of Christ who in the 1st Century had been put to death for holding fast to their faith commitment. Today we are not subject to such persecution but still each of us has to find what discipleship will mean personally. One of my objections to Fundamentalism is that it presents everything as wrapped up in a nice little box, this and this is what you have to do to follow Christ. I'm proud and pleased that in Presbyterianism cheap answers aren't given but rather every individual has to pray and seek, love and search, and shape their own path of discipleship.

To me following Christ is what makes for exciting living each day. We aren't pushed into the same mold as everyone else. Every day becomes a challenge to live to the best of our understanding of Christ. Most days we fall short but that's okay because Christ is there to help us start again. That's why the Bible speaks of the joy of discipleship. Boredom, which appears to be common in many lives, ought not to be a problem for the true Christian. There is so much possibility in terms of parenting, in the work place, in helping other people. Returning to an earlier illustration, those who are in a casual relationship with their Lord are like those who live together without being willing to make a permanent commitment. There is something missing, some deep intertwining that takes place only when a person says, "This is the one I want to share life with and have at the center of my being." It's no accident that the Church historically referred to marriage as a frame of reference for one's relationship with Christ. It's no accident that when I talk of a vision for ministry for this church commitment to the Living Lord has to be one of the foundational principles.

One time our eldest son came back from Cape Cod and said, "Dad, here is an illustration you just have to use some time. We saw a woman wearing a T-shirt that said, 'Jesus is coming. Look busy.'" He was right. It fits perfectly with our morning text. I have been to so many meetings in churches around this presbytery where people are bogged down in details and never get to talking about what Christ wants us to be about. I think it was Emerson who said, "It's not enough to be busy so are ants."

On the other side, consider this true story. A team of fundamentalist Christians came to a Mennonite community in Indiana to bring the so-called "lost" of that town to Christ. Mennonites are somewhat similar to the Amish in their faith practices and very religious in their own ways. Nevertheless, in front of Yoder's village store one of these visiting Christians confronted a Mennonite farmer with the challenge, "Brother, are you saved?" The farmer was stunned by the question. All his years of attending the Peace

Tree Mennonite congregation had not prepared him for such a question, particularly in front of the village store.

Wanting not to offend, he seriously considered how he might answer. After a long pause, the farmer asked his questioner for a pencil and paper and proceeded to list the names of people he believed knew him well. Most, he explained, were his friends, but some were less than that and might even be enemies. He suggested that the person ask these people whether they thought him saved since he certainly would not presume to answer such a question on his own behalf.

Jesus might have asked his listeners and us: who is closer to the Kingdom of God: the individual trying to look busy and whose commitment is really quite shallow or the Mennonite farmer? The vision for the future calls for this church to be more than just busy; it challenges us to be on the move in spreading the Good News of Jesus the Christ and continually caring about the needs of others.